

VZCZCXRO7151
RR RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHMR RUEHRN
DE RUEHLG #0155 0821313
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 231313Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY LILONGWE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0395
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0322
RUEHBZ/AMEMBASSY BRAZZAVILLE 0013
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L LILONGWE 000155

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/23/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MI](#)
SUBJECT: MALAWI: WEB REPORT CLAIMS MUTHARIKA SERIOUSLY ILL

REF: 08 LILONGWE 676

Classified By: Poloff John Letvin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) On March 22 Nyasa Times, a notoriously anti-government web site linked to former President Bakili Muluzi, claimed that President Mutharika had become seriously ill and fallen into a coma. The web report claimed that Mutharika's cancellation of two campaign rallies, March 22 in Blantyre and March 25 in Mangochi, was due to illness. Presidential spokesman Chikumbutso Mtumodzi had cited heavy rain and bad weather for the cancellations. In a separate story, Nyasa Times claimed that Mutharika's brother - Dr. Peter Mutharika - was now running Malawi. Nyasa Times has long reported that President Mutharika has been ill with prostate cancer, but the reports remain unconfirmed. In a 2008 exchange of letters between Mutharika and Muluzi (reftel), Mutharika bitterly complained about Muluzi spreading false stories of Mutharika's ill health.

¶2. (C) Comment: Nyasa Times regularly publishes rumors and speculation -- especially where President Mutharika is concerned -- with reckless abandon. Mutharika's the successful cover-up of his wife's long illness in 2006, and the lack of any public appearances over the weekend, have further fueled the speculation. Post currently has no reason to believe these reports are true. The weather has recently been notably poor with heavy rains, but Malawian politicians have never let weather stop rallies in the past. We believe the more likely explanation for suspending the campaign events is that President Mutharika is taking a cautious approach to public events in order to avoid violence. The planned event in Blantyre, where Muluzi still enjoys greater support than Mutharika, was to take place only 36 hours after the Malawi Electoral Commission rejected Muluzi as a presidential candidate (septel). Moreover, Mangochi remains the heart of Muluzi's support base and despite peaceful acceptance of the MEC ruling so far, Mutharika would likely encounter many UDF partisans that could have created a potentially hostile environment. End Comment
BODDE